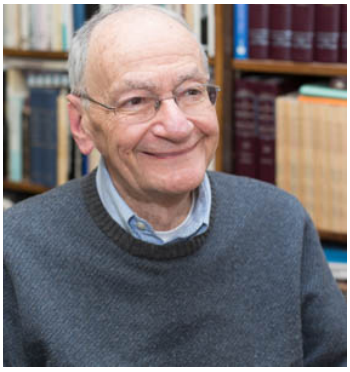
Why Jews Light Candles



TETZAVVEH

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TORAH PORTION | HAFTARAH PORTION

Judaism is hard to imagine without candles. We use them often for a variety of purposes. This week, for example, I observed again the yahrzeit of my father, and for twenty-four hours a memorial candle shed its light in our [illegible] nset of Yom Kippur, it has long been custo[illegible] parents. And during the week of *shivah* (mou[illegible]es created by the loss of a loved one. All three[illegible] Proverbs 20:27 that "The lifebreath of man [illegible]

But s[illegible]press transitions. Thus the celebration of Shab[illegible]or to sunset we kindle minimally two. My parer[illegible]e ceiling of our living room (unused), comes with eight branches for oil, each with a channel leading to a drip cup underneath. Whether two or eight,

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wax or oil, the flame burns evenly and quietly on a single wick symbolizing to a tee the tranquility of Shabbat. In contrast, the torch-like candle which brings Shabbat to a close in a colorful ceremony called *havdalah* (to distinguish), consists of several wicks. Its bounding, restless flame anticipates the hectic state of our lives about to resume with the start of another work week.

While every major holiday in Judaism begins with the lighting of candles to mark the transition from profane to sacred time, the lighting of candles during the eight days of Hanukkah is meant to commemorate the event itself which, according to the Talmud, gave rise to the holiday. The candles this time mark no transition, but rather the miracle of a tiny cruse of olive oil that lasted incredibly for eight days.

The seedbed for this widespread ritual use of fire as symbolic language is none other than the Bible, where light imagery abounds. Repeatedly, to express the inexpressible, its authors took recourse to images of light. Thus, the process of imposing order on chaos begins with the divine command, "Let there be light "(Genesis 1:3). Or Moses first experiences God's compassion in the form of a random bush aflame yet unconsumed (Exodus 3:2). That same compassion manifests itself in the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide the Israelites on their arduous journey (Exodus 13:20-21). At Mount Sinai, God's presence is established by fire atop the mountain, "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire," (Exodus 19:18).

More metaphoric are references to God in the psalms. Thus, Psalm 36:10 speaks of God's light: "With you is the fountain if life; by Your light do we see light," as does Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path." In Psalm 19, the psalmist juxtaposes the vigor and regularity of the sun moving across the heavens each day with the perfection of God's Torah, both being endowed with unending restorative powers (5-8). The association of the sun with Torah, I believe, is what allowed the artisans of the fifth century synagogue in Sepphoris to appropriate the chariots of the Greek sun god Helios (minus the figure of Helios) for the centerpiece of their striking mosaic floor.

Nor was the Tabernacle, still the subject of this week's *parashah*, without artificial light. The seven-branched menorah, which stood outside the Holy of Holies and opposite the table displaying the twelve loaves of bread, was to be kindled each evening to dispel the darkness. The Torah required the finest oil that humans could produce, "clear oil of beaten olives (Exodus 27:20)." Like the pillar of fire which illumined the space outside the camp[illegible] temple practice of nightly kindling (*ner tamid*[illegible] light in the synagogue. But not without the m[illegible]

The [illegible] was for the benefit of the priests and not God. [illegible]es and not for God ("to bring you clear oil" in[illegible] The pronoun in the second person singu[illegible]

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Similarly, the Talmud points out that the menorah stood at a remove from the table. An earthly king retiring for the night would place the light on a table by his bed. Finally, the Talmud contends again from scriptural evidence, that in Solomon's Temple the windows of the building were wide on the inside and narrow on the outside suggesting that the holy light of the sanctuary flowed out to grace the world. In short, the true purpose of the menorah, according to the Talmud, was to offer testimony to all humanity that God's presence resided among the people of Israel (B.T. *Menahot* 86b). And once having affixed this meaning to the menorah, it was but a small step to an eternal light in the synagogue to signify the same comforting message to Jews wherever they might be dispersed.

By extension, the metaphoric language of light is also applied to God's Torah. Basing itself on Psalms 119:105, "Your word (God) is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path," the midrash depicts the Torah as a light that keeps one from stumbling, an unerring moral compass. Metaphor has created kinship. God, Torah and the human soul find common ground in the imagery of light, in consequence of which the midrash dares to conceive God as promising every Jew that "If my light will be in your hand, your light will be in My hand (Shemot Rabba 36:3)." I know of no more poetic formulation for a life of Torah in all of rabbinic literature. Both the soul and Torah emanate from God. To guide the former by the latter will serve to perpetuate both. Reciprocity holds the key to eternity for each of us.

In the final analysis, light as ritual and metaphor illustrates that what poetry is to prose ritual is to theology, and that when these two media of the heart intersect, each greatly enriches the other.

Shabbat shalom,

Ismar Schorsch

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